

## **Bridging the Gap from Classroom-based Learning to Experiential Professional Learning: A Hong Kong Case**

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### **Abstract**

This paper describes and evaluates a funded longitudinal teaching development project that aims to bridge the gap from classroom-based theory learning to experiential professional learning, and thereby prepare ideal and competent world class graduates. To align with the University's shared mission to foster links with the business community, the design of the internship program has a threefold purpose and was implemented in stages. It intends to enhance students' professional awareness-knowledge-skills through a multi-leveled approach integrating classroom learning with professional practice. A debriefing mechanism was also built in enabling students to share their learning and professional challenges, and theory application to problem-solving scenarios. A 360 degree multiple evaluation procedure were used to measure the project effectiveness, including the use of industry consultants, student interns, hosts, and academic supervisors. The project has proved to promote closer ties with the business community and enhance students' professional competencies to increase future success in the competitive job market. The impact of the internship program is significant in two aspects. From the perspective of student learning, the internship allows students to understand how they can improve business efficiency by applying communications theories. From the teaching perspective, the successful and unsuccessful intern experiences can be drawn upon in developing class-room teaching. These lessons can focus on preparing students to solve real-world business communication problems.

**Keywords:** experiential professional learning; internship program design; from students to professionals

## A. Introduction

Traditional classroom teaching that provides students with theory-based knowledge is proven inadequate when students are required to apply classroom learned theories into the real world of business. To stay competitive, employers are expecting universities to provide work ready graduates who possess the requisite professional skills necessary to seamlessly transfer to the workplace. University students not only need to acquire field knowledge and communication skills, but also are encouraged to have hands-on working experience in the business sector. Consequently, providing students with authentic learning experiences and preparing work ready graduates has become an ongoing challenge for universities in Hong Kong and around the world. To bridge the gap, student internship program as an academic component are offered by institutions of higher education as an effective way to provide students with the opportunity for hands-on practical experience and to increase their employment marketability upon graduation (e.g., Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000; Getzel, Briel, & Kregel, 2000; Kysor & Pierce, 2000; Reardon, Lenz, & Folsom, 1998; Swift & Russell, 1999).

Past research has examined the many facets of internship programs in different fields of study. Alpert, F., Heaney & Kuhn (2009) study examined the effect of an undergraduate marketing internship in Australia. Phoebe (2010) examined the determining factors that were likely to affect internship effectiveness to the Hong Kong university students. In Taiwan, Chen, H., Wang & Chen (2011) investigated the effect of internship experience on the behavioral intentions of college students majoring in leisure management. In the United States, several studies were conducted to examine the internship programs in higher education (e.g., Briel & Getzel, 2001; Gault, Leach, & Duey, 2010; Jackel, 2011; Radigan, 2009; Ross & Elechi, 2002). Results of these studies have confirmed that internship experience benefits university students for career clarification (Reardon et al., 1998; Stone & McLauren, 1999) and creates a network of contacts (Cates-McIver, 1998; Radigan, 2009; Tackett, Wolf, & Law, 2001) in addition to gaining course credits.

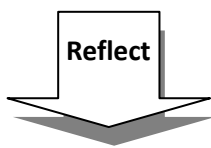
In view of this, the thrust of the internship program is to expose students to a real world of work by bridging the gap from classroom-based theoretical learning to experience-based professional learning, and thereby to prepare competent world class graduates. Moreover, the internship opportunity reinforces and validates the application of theoretical and pedagogical knowledge and practical skills (Kuh, 2000; Storey, 2010). Integrating classroom learned curricular with internship is critical to the student's preparation for educational and career goal achievement and ultimate employability (Getzel et al., 2000; Williams, 2000).

This paper reports a teaching development project funded by a Hong Kong-based tertiary institution to evaluate the effectiveness of an internship program. The design of the internship program is in line with the University's shared mission of "from students to professionals" aiming to provide students opportunities to apply what they have learned in class to real-world business organizations, and to enable them to put theory into practice in the Hong Kong business context. Consequently, the current study aims to align classroom learning input with industry needs by using hands-on experiential internship across the curriculum.

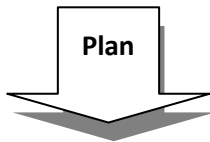
In this paper, I first describe the theoretical base of the internship program design. I then review the relevant literature examining the factors that influence the effectiveness of the internship programs. Thirdly, I describe the design of an internship program and report its effectiveness from stakeholder's perspectives. Finally, I put forth the recommendations.

## B. Theoretical Base of the Internship Program Design

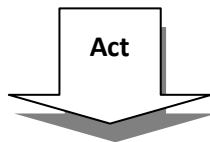
The underlying theory for the design of the internship program is based on the five-stage Action Research Spiral model (Lewin, 1946) that reflects the action learning process. Activities that are relevant to the internship program design are described below.



The first stage of internship program design is “reflection” which identifies the background of problems underlying the internship program. There is a growing recognition that internships provide students with “hands-on” work experiences that are linked to their learning. The linkage enhances their professional skills and refines their career focus. The initial problem that geared the internship project was the lack of opportunity to expose students to real-world work experience which could better equip them for their future careers. Consequently, the internship program was designed to add realism and raise student motivation and involvement by incorporating the internships into an undergraduate program curriculum.



The plan addressed how to integrate business and professional communication courses into the fabric of a two-to three-month or equivalent to 200 hours of internship program. During the planning stage, a committee was formed to design and develop the internship program.



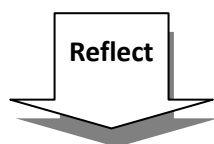
The action phase involved the actual operation of the internship program, which consisted of pre-internship training, internship placements, and on-site supervision. The major activity embedded in the action phase was the monitoring of the internship process among three parties, namely students, host supervisors, and academic supervisors. An experienced industry consultant was hired to assist the internship committee in monitoring the overall running of the internship, to maintain instant communication, and to provide feedback to student interns. In the mid-course of internship period, the consultant met with host supervisors to conduct performance appraisals of student interns and resolved any issues that had arisen.

From the student intern perspective, the action stage focused on assessing their performance as to whether they had fulfilled not only all the tasks assigned by the host supervisors, but also their academic requirements, such as a communication log, bi-weekly progress reports, and a final work report.



The observation phase measured the effectiveness of the internship program. Multiple evaluation procedures were used from

differing perspectives and at various times during the course of the project. The evaluation aimed at uncovering both general and specific problems and making suggestions for improvement. Mechanisms used for evaluating the success of the internship program and student learning process included students' reports, host supervisor's evaluations, and the course examiner's assessment.



In the reflection phase, student interns digested and processed their experience after they had successfully completed their internships. The student interns reflected critically on their successes, failures, and ways of improving. Debriefing was conducted on a one-on-one basis between each student intern and the consultant at the end of summer term.

### **C. Literature Review**

The present study examines the effect of internship program to determine the factors that are likely to affect its effectiveness. To establish a frame of reference, I first review the studies that examined the linkage between academic performance and career development and the mechanism set to measure its effectiveness. I also review the importance of student preparedness and employer readiness for internships.

#### **1. Linking Academic Performance and Career Development**

To enhance the employability of the graduates and their competitiveness in the job market, obtaining a high grade-point average is no longer adequate. Employers are looking for potential employees with a college degree and abilities of applying the academic classroom learned knowledge into practical work experience (Reardon et al., 1998). Internship program and service learning projects are important ingredients in designing an undergraduate program. Curricular-based internship programs not only provide students with opportunities to attest their career interests, solidify their career goals and aspiration, and also enhance their employability (e.g., (Getzel et al., 2000; Reardon et al., 1998). In recognizing the fact that fresh graduates are usually lack of real-world working experience, employers tend to consider internship experience to be crucial when recruiting graduates for entry-level employment (Reardon et al., 1998). Many businesses use participation in internships as a means to identify, train, and develop potential full-time employees. Surveys conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) in 2001, 2010, and 2013 reveal an increasing trend that more and more employers offer jobs to their interns. For example, in 2001 NACE Survey, employers reported that they offered jobs to 57% of their intern class, and by 2010, the number was increased to 70%. In 2013 survey, the result shows that 63% of the senior management had an internship or cooperative education experience. Results of these surveys over a decade demonstrated that work-based experiential learning opportunities (e.g., internships, cooperative education) are important enabling university students to apply hands-on academic knowledge, competencies and practical skills to the real work environment (e.g., Cook, Parker, & Pettijohn, 2004; Lubbers, 2000; Radigan, 2009; Verney, Holoiviak, & Winter, 2009).

## **2. Mechanism Set to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Internship Programs**

Although internships have been commonly integrated into the undergraduate curriculum, little research was devoted to systematically measure its effectiveness. To ensure the effect of internship program that benefits students and employers, it is important to establish a mechanism that provides a 360 degree of evaluation to the internship program. Verney et al. (2009) study demonstrated that the evaluation of student interns by host organizations can not only be a useful method of assessing student intern's performance, but also provide a good mechanism in reviewing and revising program quality. The results demonstrated that universities that provide students with a well-designed and managed internship program not only enhance the employability of students at the time of graduation, but are also validate their program curriculum in a real- world organizational setting. Consequently, host organization's evaluation of the intern is important to assess the overall effectiveness of the internship program and the program curriculum. Verney et al., (2009) study also revealed the importance of the tri-party (the student intern, the host organization, and the institution) assessments are aligned and assessed systematically.

Another survey conducted by Intern Bridge to 8,939 interns in 2011 (as cited in Carey (2013)) revealed an inconclusiveness result. The findings showed that (1) 33% of the respondents indicated that they did not receive a formal supervisor evaluation; (2) 15% reported that they were visited by an advisor or faculty member at the work site; and (3) 41% of the participants stated that they were not required to present a paper or make a presentation. To enhance the quality assurance of internship program, Flemister, Gampert, and Grindley (2013) recommended that to ensure internship program to be effective, internship coordinators of the academic units must work hand-in hand with the community and include ever party affected in the process of program design and decision-making.

## **3. Readiness of Student Interns and Host Organizations for Internships**

Past research has revealed a big perception gap between the college graduates and employers. A survey by Jaschik (January 20, 2015) found that college students think they are being well-prepared with the skills and qualities needed for careers, but employers are dubious. Phoebe (2010) addressed the importance of developing effective mechanism and identified determining factors that predict the internship success so as to enhance their placement program toward graduates' employability. The findings indicated that the readiness of student interns and the employers contribute to the internship success. Phoebe noted that at the individual factors, self-initiative, academic preparedness and positive attitude of the interns played a major role in determining a successful internship.

Employer readiness can also be a determining factor and as critically important as student readiness to ensure the internship success. Phoebe's (2010) study revealed that the four organizational (employer) factors such as job challenge, effective supervision and clarity of task, and compensation, were clearly associated with the effectiveness of the internship program. Bukaliya's (2012) study further revealed the importance of employer readiness to the internship success. The results showed that while student interns favored internship programs to experience the real life of work, they often felt working as student interns was challenging. The challenges were the

reluctance of the permanent employees in disclosing proper workplace information, or the unwillingness of the employers to delegate the real work to challenge intern's intellectual abilities.

Based on the relevant literature reviewed, the purpose of this paper is twofold. First, the paper explores what constitutes an effective internship program design. Second, the paper analyzes the mechanism set to measure the effectiveness of the internship.

#### **D. Research Methodology**

The present study employs the case study method to examine the effectiveness of an undergraduate internship program in professional communication field (public relations, advertising) at a Hong Kong tertiary institution. The use of the case study approach allows the researcher to investigate and explore the essence and nuances through detailed, in-depth, triangulation of data collection approach (Creswell, 2007, 2008).

Both quantitative and qualitative data collection method was employed. In the next, I describe research participants, the quality assurance mechanism used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, and the data analysis.

##### **1. Participants**

Involved in the present study were host supervisors taking part in the internship program. The participating host organizations were local, regional, and international companies including public relations agencies, health/skin care providers, business association and not-for-profit organizations. Adopting the convenient sampling is not an uncommon research method for studying organizational phenomena in hypercompetitive places such as Hong Kong. This sampling method can be considered purposeful where involved host organizations were selected intentionally to fit the nature of the study. Each participant (student interns, host supervisors and academic supervisors) was purposefully selected and invited to take part in the study.

##### **2. Data Collection and Analysis**

Two sets of the questionnaires were designed to track the overall learning of the student interns and understand the development of the internship program and areas for enhancement prior to, during and after the internship program. The first set of the questionnaire is Host Organization Evaluation (HOE) that provided additional texture and insights by assessing interns' overall performance. The questionnaire consists of three major sections. The first section was a 27-item statements focusing on: (a) the felt degree of professionalism of student interns; (b) interpersonal skills of interns interacting with supervisor, colleagues, and clients; and (c) writing / communication/ and production ability. The second part of the questionnaire included six open-ended questions where the host supervisors provided qualitative comments on interns' strengths and weaknesses, suggestions to improve intern's performance, and suggestions regarding the internship program. The third part of the questionnaire is a written response and reflection which was completed by individual interns after reading and discussing the performance appraisal review with the host supervisors or the line managers.

The second set of the questionnaire is “Host Feedback on Internship Program” which was designed and conducted by the independent consultant. The focus of the second set of the questionnaire was to (1) examine the extent to which the academic program and curriculum has well prepared graduates to transfer the classroom learned theories and skills to the workplace, (2) evaluate the effectiveness of the internship program, and (3) identify areas for improvement. This is a follow-up questionnaire consisting of 16 close-ended and open ended questions. The first 8 questions aim to measure the host supervisor’s feedback on the overall internship program from quantitative perspective. The remaining 8 questions are qualitative in nature aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the observations, reflections, and assessments from the host supervisor’s views. In the next, I further describe the quantitative and qualitative data collection.

a. Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative data was derived from two sets of the questionnaires. The first set of the questionnaire consisted of 27 items with a 5-point Likert Scale. This self-designed survey is a 27-item questionnaire measuring student interns’ performance from host supervisor perspective. It is designed to measure three independent dimensions of the student interns’ abilities in three major categories; that are, professionalism, interpersonal skills, and writing/ communication/ production abilities. In the second set of the follow-up questionnaire, 8 questions were close-ended questions in 10-point Likert scale. These questions examine whether the academic program and curriculum has prepared work ready graduates allowing them to transfer the classroom learned knowledge and skills to fulfill the needs of the workplace,

All participants were given instructions before completing the questionnaire including the nature of study and time required to complete the survey. To encourage optimum participation, a personalized cover letter was attached to the survey instruments. The host supervisors were requested to submit their questionnaires two weeks after the end of internship program. According to Dillman (1978) Total Design Method, it is critical that a response time period of 15 days be allotted for survey responses which should also include one reminder sent after one week of distribution of the survey. Because of the fact that the internship coordinator had established good personal connection and the personal email reminder, the survey response rate was almost 100% except one host supervisor’s departure right after the internship program.

b. Qualitative Data Collection

The qualitative data collection was a multi-method allowing the researcher to obtain detailed qualitative views from multiple sources and to make sense of or interpret phenomena Denzin & Lincoln (2005) reflected by student interns and host supervisors. The qualitative data came from three sources: host supervisor’s comments on student intern’s performance, student intern’s response and self-reflection on their participation in the internship program, and independent consultant’s report. The student interns were also required to submit a final report. The final report consists of five aspects: objectives of their individual internship and job assignments; measurement of success by the host supervisor; self-reflection of the actual results and achieved objectives; areas of improvements; and the recommendation of how to

enhance effectiveness for the business itself. The purpose of this paper is to examine the overall performance of the interns and the effectiveness of the internship program from host supervisors and host organization perspective, and therefore, the intern's final reports will only be referred where applicable.

### **E. Description of the Internship Program**

To enhance students' professional awareness, knowledge, and communication skills, the design of the internship program adopted a multi-level approach by integrating classroom learning with experiential professional practice. This internship program attempted not only to promote closer ties with the business community, but also to enhance students' professional competence, thereby increasing their success in their future workplace.

The internship program was implemented in three stages; namely a pre-internship preparation, the internship experience, and a post-internship debriefing. In the next, I describe the development of the internship program and highlight activities embedded in these three stages.

#### **1. Pre-internship Preparation Period**

To prepare student interns to work efficiently in the real world of business, the interns were required to attend a series of pre-internship workshops. The workshops were designed to provide students with a valuable opportunity to integrate their classroom learning with the practical skills that local and/or international organizations would require. These activities were intended to serve as a bridge between the classroom and work experience. In addition, these workshops were designed to equip students with skills and the mindset for their internships by involving personnel from the host organizations as training consultants. Topics of the workshops included workplace expectations, business etiquette, situational-based interpersonal communication skills, and career planning. Above all, these workshops aimed to help students prepare themselves cognitively and affectively for their future careers by maximizing their formal education, English-communication abilities, and professional business etiquette.

#### **2. The Internship Period**

Once interns were successfully placed within the host organizations, the internship coordinator met with the host supervisors to negotiate the internship agreement that highlighted the job responsibilities of the three parties: the student intern, the host supervisor, and internship coordinator.

During the internship period, interns were required to submit bi-weekly work-in-progress report. The bi-weekly reports were submitted to and reviewed by host supervisors. Evaluation was based upon their satisfaction level with progress in the assigned work and the performance of the intern. The bi-weekly reports highlighted the achievements of the student intern over the past two-week period, summarized project outputs and deliverables, outlined important issues, and projected future plans for the next two weeks.

In the mid-course of the internship, the internship coordinator met with host supervisors to discuss issues that had come up during the first month. After meeting



with the host supervisors, the internship coordinator met with the interns to provide them with the feedback gathered from the host supervisors. The purpose of the mid-term informal evaluation was to identify any possible hiccup before it became serious.

### **3. Post-internship Debriefing Period**

Debriefing activities are an essential component of project-based learning activities and proved to be the most meaningful in terms of learning Du-Babcock & Babcock (2000). Through reflecting on their internship experiences, student interns were able to recognize, describe, and understand how the internship had deepened their learning.

The post-internship debriefing consisted of two activities. Two weeks after the end of the internships, students were required to submit self-reflective final work reports and to meet with the internship coordinator to discuss their overall learning. The final work reports were reviewed by host supervisors, whose evaluation was based upon the level of satisfaction of the intern's performance regarding the assigned work and the related performance of the student interns.

The second debriefing activity involved host supervisors, the internship coordinator, and student interns. At the end of the internship period, the host supervisors provided feedback to student interns by (1) filling in the host organization's evaluation (HOE) report and (2) participating in a face-to-face consultation with student interns, and the internship coordinator. The host evaluation report consisted of both quantitative and qualitative evaluations. Aside from quantitative evaluation, the host supervisors also provided qualitative comments that focused on whether the student interns had potential to succeed in a career similar to their internships. The host supervisors gave observations of the specific intern's strengths and weaknesses, as well as general comments on how the student interns could improve their performance. The host supervisor then reviewed this evaluation with the student intern and the intern provided a written response to his or her supervisor's performance appraisal.

The post-internship debriefing built on the two prior stages and attempted to put emphasis on the theories of how the program curriculum prepare student interns for their future careers, as well as the actual practice students experienced. The debriefing with student interns individually allowed them to go back to their "safety zone". To summarize, the debriefing activities provided an opportunity for student interns to reflect on their internship experience, share their experience with the course examiner, and learn from the professionals.

### **F. Evaluation of Effectiveness**

In this section, I report the findings that examine the effectiveness of the internship program from stakeholder's perspectives. First, I report the quantitative analysis of the two sets of the questionnaires: Host Organization Evaluation on Intern's Performance (HOE) and Host Organization Feedback on Internship Program. To delve into the nuances and gain a deeper understanding of intern's performance and internship program, I also report and summarize the findings of the qualitative views.

**1. Quantitative Analysis of Host Organization Evaluation (HOE) on Intern’s Performance**

To examine how host supervisors evaluate the overall performance of the student interns, the mean scores of the 27 items were calculated and compared. The Pearson Correlations Coefficients were also conducted to explore the relationships between the interpersonal skills and the communication and production ability.

Table 1 lists the mean scores of 27 items that provide an overall impression of the degree to which each host supervisor felt the student intern performed in the three identified categories: professionalism, interpersonal skills, and writing/communication/production ability. The results show that in a 5-point Likert scale, the mean scores of nine items were at 4 and above indicating that the workplace supervisors felt the degree of professionalism of the student interns was high. For instance, the workplace supervisors noted that the student interns were able to meet deadlines and to follow the instructions and directions from the supervisors. They also felt that interns had a good work attitude, were reliable, and were punctual. However, the workplace supervisor evaluation also reveals that student interns were neither able to make decisions when needed, nor take initiative or contribute at the meetings. These results may be due to the lack of confidence of the student interns. The findings are consistent with Westwood’s (1992) study that Asian employees are good at following employers’ directions, but are afraid of making decisions or taking the initiative.

As for the interpersonal skills, the host supervisors felt that interns were well liked and respected by co-workers and clients, but interns was not able to deal professionally with co-workers and clients as well as present themselves in a confident manner. Of the three major categories, the host supervisors rated student interns’ written and oral communication ability relatively lower than the other two skills.. The overall mean scores range between 3.5 and 3.8 indicating that student interns only achieved a satisfactory rating in their ability to communicate orally or in writing.

Table 1: Mean Scores of 27 Items of Host Supervisor’s Assessments on Intern’s Performance

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Mean</i>
<b><i>Professionalism</i></b>	
1. Able to meet deadlines and work under pressure	4.08
2. Able to make decisions when needed	3.30
3. Exhibits initiative – a self starter	3.74
4. Accepts direction from line manager	4.44
5. Eager to improve performance and learn from mistakes	4.08
6. Has good work attitude	4.35
7. Shows an interest in, and understands organization’s mission and goals	3.71
8. Understands job responsibilities	4.00
9. Able to cope under pressure	3.79
10. Uses time efficiently (good time-management)	3.65

11. Produces quality work	3.96
12. Follows instructions	4.23
13. Prepares thoroughly for and contributes to meetings	3.46
14. Reliable	4.04
15. Punctual	4.32
16. Well groomed	4.24
<b><i>Interpersonal Skills</i></b>	
17. Deals professionally with co-workers and clients	3.92
18. Well liked and respected by co-workers and clients	4.12
19. Communicates well with others	3.92
20. Confident manner	3.65
<b><i>Writing/ Communication/ Production Ability</i></b>	
21. Grammatical accuracy	3.62
22. Expression of ideas	3.88
23. Word usage	3.52
24. Accuracy of spelling	3.86
25. Appropriate tone and style for intended audience	3.76
26. Sentences and paragraphs link ideas coherently	3.76
27. Consistent organization of content	3.83

In addition to presenting the mean scores of the host supervisor assessments, Pearson Correlation Coefficients were also performed to measure the strengths of correlation in the aspects of professionalism, interpersonal skills, and written and oral communication ability. The results of the correlations are reported in the following discussion.

a. Professionalism

According to the results of the Pearson correlation test, being able to meet the deadline (mean = 4.08) is an essential element of professionalism. The results show that the interns' ability to meet deadlines highly correlates with many other important aspects of professionalism, except the items of exhibiting initiative and being well-groomed (no statistical significance was shown for these two items). That means host supervisors who felt their interns were able to meet deadlines felt they were also able to do well in other aspects of professionalism. For example, interns who were able to meet deadlines could accept direction from their line managers (mean = 4.44;  $r = .538$ ) and follow job instructions (mean = 4.23;  $r = .702$ ). They had good time management skills (mean = 3.65;  $r = .650$ ) and were able to exhibit a good work attitude (mean = 4.35;  $r = .630$ ). Consequently, they could cope under pressure (mean = 3.79;  $r = .801$ ) and understand job responsibilities (mean = 4.00;  $r = .561$ ). More importantly, these interns were considered reliable (mean = 4.04;  $r = .813$ ) and punctual (mean = 4.32;  $r = .764$ ) by their host supervisors.

b. Interpersonal Skills

In terms of interpersonal skills, supervisors of the host companies/ organizations who felt their interns had a confident manner (mean = 3.65) were also able to communicate well with others (mean = 3.92;  $r = .787$ ) and were able to deal professionally with their co-workers and clients (mean = 3.92;  $r = .787$ ). These two skills are both considered important in establishing efficient interpersonal relationships in a workplace. The results also show that host supervisors who evaluated their interns as being well liked and respected by co-workers and clients (mean = 4.12) were able to achieve different aspects of professionalism related to interpersonal skills. For example, according to the results, interns who were liked and respected by both their co-workers and clients were able to exhibit a good work attitude (mean = 4.35;  $r = .606$ ), to understand the organization's mission and goals (mean = 3.71;  $r = .648$ ) and to understand job responsibilities (mean = 4.00;  $r = .680$ ). Moreover, they could cope under pressure (mean = 3.79;  $r = .605$ ) and had good time management skills (mean = 3.65;  $r = .433$ ). They could produce quality work (mean = 3.96;  $r = .500$ ) and follow job instructions (mean = 4.23;  $r = .642$ ), as well as prepare thoroughly and contribute to meetings (mean = 3.46;  $r = .797$ ). Besides the aforementioned, these interns were felt to be reliable (mean = 4.04;  $r = .853$ ) by their host supervisors.

c. Written and Oral Communication Ability

When it came to the interns' writing and communication ability, based on the results of the Pearson correlation test the overall ratings were not as high as the ratings on professionalism. Among the different items related to the writing and speaking, the host supervisors emphasized the interns' ability to use appropriate tone and style for an intended audience (mean = 3.76). The results show item correlates with other aspects of communication. For example, host supervisors who felt their interns were able to use appropriate tone and style also have high grammatical accuracy (mean = 3.62;  $r = .564$ ) and spelling (mean = 3.86;  $r = .563$ ), and were adept at different word usage (mean = 3.52;  $r = .534$ ). Moreover, being able to organize content consistently (mean = 3.83) also positively correlates with the ability to produce quality work (mean = 3.96;  $r = .824$ ), to follow instructions (mean = 4.23;  $r = .679$ ) and to prepare thoroughly for and contribute to meetings (mean = 3.46;  $r = .823$ ). Thus, the writing and speaking communication ability of interns is associated with different items of professionalism. The interns' ability to link their ideas together coherently in sentences and paragraphs (mean = 3.76) also positively correlates with their ability to produce quality work (mean = 3.96;  $r = .605$ ) and to prepare thoroughly for and contribute to meetings (mean = 3.46;  $r = .763$ ). The results indicate that communication skills impact on both work quality and productivity.

Results of the Pearson Correlations Coefficients also show that interns who communicated well with others are likely to write well and produce high quality work. The results also reveal that interns who possess confident manner tend to better express ideas ( $r = .499^*$ ) and better use appropriate tone and style for intended audience ( $r = .439^*$ ) and achieve better sentence and paragraph coherence ( $r = .537^*$ ) and have better and consistent organization of the content ( $r = .590^*$ ).

## **2. Quantitative Analysis of Host Organization Feedback on Internship Program**

The first part of the Host Organization Feedback on Internship Program contains eight questions. In general, Question 1 to Question 8 measures the felt degree of professionalism of interns which are the key considerations for employers when hiring. The results show that the top three mean scorers rated by the host organizations are Questions 1, 2, and 5 indicating that the host supervisors felt that the interns were ready to be employed, had good potential to succeed in a career similar to internship, and good ability to perform in the Hong Kong business context and culture.

It is worth noting that the lowest mean scores rated by the host supervisors were Question 3 (business efficiency by applying communication theories) and Question 7 (performance compared with real-world business communication professional). Such a result is commonly reported in several of the relevant studies in that the employers tend to feel that the academic programs may not provide the knowledge needed in the workplace or that the interns perceive their readiness for the job is higher than what employers think. As noted by Jaschik (January 20, 2015), three in 10 employers think that recent college graduates are not well prepared, particularly in the case for applying knowledge and skills in real-world settings, critical thinking skills, and written and oral communication skills.

However, when the host supervisors were asked whether there is a possibility of hiring the intern(s) again after graduation if suitable positions arise (Question 8), the responses were very positive except the host organizations that were small-medium sized enterprises due to their limited hiring policy. Although given positive response, some host supervisors made suggestions. A host supervisor of a multinational corporation gave encouraging remarks and commented that student interns need to “strengthen [their] abilities to handle tasks independently, proactively seek out solutions/ answers when facing problems/ hurdles” and “to develop good rapport with peers, and sense of responsibilities. These characteristics are key determinants for interns to bridge the gap from being students to competent business communications professionals.”

In sum, the results of the quantitative analysis of the HOE on intern’s performance, and the Host Organization Feedback on Internship Program indicated that while the host supervisors felt that student interns performed their tasks satisfactorily, they also felt that interns need to be proactive, interactive with colleagues, and be able to work independently.

## **3. Qualitative Reflection Analysis of the Host Organization Evaluation (HOE) Reports**

The qualitative views of the host supervisors on student interns focus on six aspects. The first two aspects focused on whether the intern delivers necessary production skills at professional level and has potential to succeed in a career similar to the internship. The host supervisors were also invited to comment on intern’s strengths and areas of improvement. The last two aspects were to comment on performance or specific incidents to illustrate the intern’s performance appraisal, and lastly provided suggestions regarding the internship program.

In reviewing the host supervisor's reports, over 90% of the host supervisors felt that the student interns were able to deliver quality work at professional level. To illustrate, a marketing director commented that "the intern's performance was excellent in taking ownership of her duties efficiently and professionally. The intern acts like a professional, so she earns herself a full-time position as Community and Marketing Assistant after completing her internship." Another comment attests that interns possessed versatile skills, and the host commented that "To a large degree, his production skill is professional especially in column writing for Capital Magazine." The satisfactory of the deliverable products may have explained that 100% of the host supervisors felt the interns have a great potential to succeed in a career similar to the internship.

In commenting intern's strengths, common strengths mentioned by the host supervisors were "good working attitude, reliable, hardworking, willing to learn, diligent and dedicated". As for the areas of improvement, most host supervisors felt that the interns seemed lack of confidence and not willing to contribute the ideas at the meetings. Some commonly observed suggestions mentioned by several host supervisors were: "Be more proactive and interactive with colleagues other than their own internship team" ; "It would be desirable to be more proactive in expressing her views and interacting with colleagues"; "Show assertiveness and never hesitate to ask questions", and " Good time management and prioritization also help to improve speed and quality of delivery". These areas of improvement may result in the Chinese culture traits. Being influenced by Confucian ethics, Chinese tend to think that subordinates should be the followers and listen to and wait for superior's instruction or order. Also, asking questions to Chinese reflects that they are either incompetent or be seen as challenging to the superior.

#### **4. Qualitative Reflection Analysis of the Host Organization Feedback on Internship Program**

The analysis of the qualitative aspect of the host organization feedback reveals that when asked about the strengths of interns, 33% of the host supervisors indicated that interns were willing to learn and 21% of them felt the interns were hard working. Other mentioned strengths included: can-do attitude, good research skills, work efficiently, takes ownership of own tasks, deliver quality results on time. For example, a Head of Publication Committee commented that "[The intern] is diligent and holds a good attitude to work and to learn. Given proper guidance, the intern can always deliver work with desired results". Another comment by a Corporate Communications Manager of a multinational corporation was that "[The] intern is hardworking and willing to learn, can work effectively and seek solutions when facing problems or hurdles."

For weaknesses, 33% of the host supervisors expressed that the interns were not proactive and lack initiative. Another one-third of them felt that interns were not confident, tended to be quiet, and not to interact with colleagues. About 30% of the host supervisors indicated that some of the interns were not committed to their work and therefore pretended to engage in the work all the time but produced no results. A Managing Director of Hair and Skin Care products who employed six interns commented that interns "can perform satisfactorily if closely supervised and guided all

the time.” She further commented that “The interns did very little if not supervised and couldn’t really carry out work on their own”.

A Head of Communications and Marketing Department also commented that “Like many interns, he tends to be quiet and stay in his work station most of the time. The intern does not mix and interact much with other colleagues. He is not confident to speak up and does not appear to be a committed person for people who do not know him”. She further commented another intern that “he is good at ‘showing’ that he is committed and busy, but he doesn’t deliver results. He frequently asks for leave in a very short notice. He is not wholeheartedly committed to his internship both in terms of commitment, performance and time in the office.”

In addition to commenting intern’s strengths and weaknesses, the host supervisors were also asked to prioritize 20 desirable qualities when selecting interns/professional employees. These qualities cover soft skills (relating to mentality and mindset), hard skills (technical skills), and transferrable skills (skills required across industries and work types). It was discovered that the most prioritized qualities are: reliability, responsibility, can-do attitude, and strong initiative and commitment. The least prioritized qualities are diligence, translation / writing ability in English and Chinese, priority management and leadership. The results reveal that employers feel that reliability, responsibility and can-do attitude are critical characteristics that interns should be equipped with. It is interesting to note the inconsistency between the English communication skills rated by the host supervisors in the Host Organization Evaluation on Intern’s Performance questionnaire and the priority importance of English language skills ranked by the host supervisors. Such an inconsistency of the results may be due to the fact that English is stipulated as the medium of instruction in Hong Kong tertiary education. In this connection, host supervisors took it for granted although they did not think that Hong Kong university graduates possess good command of the English language communication skills.

The last part of the host organization feedback questionnaire examined whether there was performance gap between the interns and the communication professionals in the host organizations regarding professionalism, interpersonal skills, and English communication competence. The results show that 83% of the host supervisors felt the performance gap existed in a combination of soft skills, hard skills and transferrable skills. One Public Relations director explains that “many of the interns cannot write English properly and very few of them can speak properly, either. Some interns have problems with their translation work in Chinese. The translation skills and bilingual communication ability is important if the interns are going to work in public relations, communications, marketing communications, corporate communications.” The Public Relations director further commented that “in a multilingual environment like Hong Kong, it is important that the interns are bilingual (English and Chinese) in order to stay competitive.” In contrast, 16% of the host supervisors think that the performance gap is “not significant” or “small”. As commented by one host supervisor that “Performance gap is small as interns’ personalities and work attitudes are valued more than work experiences. English abilities require time for improvement.”

When asked to offer suggestions to bridge the gap from being students to be competent professionals, Coordinator of a Business Forum suggested that “The interns should have the development of creativity and critical thinking; Need to be more

proactive and think of the big picture of the projects, instead of listening to supervisor's command of what to do next." Other suggestions include: "Be confident, assertive, proactive, motivated, and observant." Some host supervisors also suggested that "the interns should empower themselves and be "hungry" for industry knowledge and outreach with networking and gaining every possible learning opportunities from recruitment talks organized by potential employers and events organized by industry organizations. The interns should also "learn from top- notched real marketing and communication materials such as press releases, promotional flyers and collaterals prepared by leading businesses -- Microsoft, Coca Cola."

When asked to give overall comments and suggestions regarding the internship program, two-thirds of the host organizations gave no specific feedback indicating that the host supervisors felt that the internship program was effective as the way it was except the comment on the duration of the internship. Several host supervisors thought that the internship should be extended to six months or a year, allowing the interns to ingrain what they learn, "Given the limited hours per week committed by the intern students, what the intern can learn is minimal in a multinational national corporation", as commented by a host supervisor. Other suggestions are that "It would be much helpful if the internship program could better prepare students in their mentality and mindset in addition to real communications and PR tasks. It would also be valuable that the interns could obtain basic or essential project management or team work training so that host supervisor does not need to spend time in supervising and coaching them."

## **G. Conclusion and Recommendation**

The overall objective of the internship program is to bridge classroom-based theoretical learning and experiential professional learning, so as to nurture graduates who can compete successfully in the workplace. In order to assess the effectiveness of the internship program, a 360 degree evaluation mechanism was set and involved host supervisors, student interns, and internship coordinator. The analyses of the host supervisor evaluation on intern's overall performance and a follow-up host organization feedback on internship questionnaires demonstrate that internship program enables students to apply their communication theories to real business settings. From the learning perspective, students begin to understand how they can improve their personal effectiveness in applying business and communication theories to the real business context. From the teaching perspective, the interns' experiences, both successful and unsuccessful, can be drawn upon in developing classroom teaching modules.

Drawing on the quantitative analysis of evaluation of the student interns and internship programs together with the qualitative reflections, the recommendations are put forth to bridge the gap of "from being students to competent professionals" in relation to strengthen the essential soft, hard, and transferrable skills. The recommendation will be organized in a three-stage period; that is: prior to, during and after the internship program.

### **1. Recommendations Prior to the Internship Program**

- a. Organizing Mandatory, Preparatory Training Workshops prior to the Internship Program



These mandatory workshops can include problem solving skills, project management, and business communication in workplace, such as internal and external communication, organizing and taking part at meetings, coordinating agenda, and preparing minutes. The pre-internship workshops will greatly strengthen the fundamental skillset required by modern communications professionals and raise the bar and performance of student interns.

b. Making Internship Applications like a Real Job Application by Building of Job Application Website

Creating a job application website to simulate as a real employment portal where participating host's corporate profile, intern job openings, job descriptions, and requirements are listed online. Students are given the opportunities to apply for the openings and follow through on their own. In so doing, the interns gain real-world experience in job application, such as researching company profiles, preparing application package, attending interviews, experiencing competition with other candidates, and understanding the challenges and difficulties of winning a job offer. Through the process, students will also get to know better about their career choices – their likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats. In addition, students are likely to appreciate their intern opportunity more after making their own efforts rather than being allocated a host.

**2. Recommendations During the Internship Program**

A mentoring system or component can be introduced shortly before or right after the internship program starts. The mentor can be interns from previous years or any experienced interns who could advise intern freshmen some orientation tips of dos and don'ts as interns. The mentoring scheme can alleviate the possible discomfort, difficulties, or challenges the novice interns may encounter. In the middle course of the internship, informal social gathering or formal meeting can be arranged for all interns to share their internship experience and learn from each other.

**3. Recommendations after the Internship Program**

a. Providing Debriefing Opportunity to Share Good Practices

A closing ceremony or formal debriefing can be arranged to allow hosts, interns, and individuals involved to celebrate the successful school-business partnership, share rewarding experience, and enhance the ties between university and business community. Exhibition to showcase the intern's deliverable products or commemorative brochure can be produced to document intern's achievements and benefits of internship to their overall learning.

b. Maintaining Contacts with Hosts

If possible, host supervisors can be invited to become mentors for selected interns to provide career advice. Maintaining post internship relationship with host supervisors may increase intern's career opportunities. For instance, if hosts are satisfied with the performance of intern advisees, they may offer job opportunities or make referrals after their graduation.

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